

LAYING A FOUNDATION

By Terri White

The house that sits on wobbly cinder blocks or rotting timbers shudders at the thought of a storm, and tornadoes that swoop annually through north central Texas eagerly gobble up those types of structures. Similarly, laying a solid foundation on which your child builds his life, is the most important aspect of your child's education. Studies in science, history, literature, and vocational preparation **all** require a springboard that enables your child to rise to the challenges of life. Hence, the early educational process remains essential to one's future.

Dr. Raymond Moore, a leading educator, researched extensively in early childhood development. Instead of frantically shoveling truckloads of academics in children younger than age seven, he recommends that parents give preschoolers the freedom to play at home, provide simple chores, read to the child each day, and create a life of gentle routines that build security and good health. These early years of exploring the world around them will give meaning to future "book learning".

But why age seven? In truth, while age seven is not the "magic" age for academic readiness, it does offer an average age - some children are not ready until ages eight or ten while others are ready earlier. Joseph Halliwell, in his "Reviewing of Reviews on School Entrance Age and School Success", revealed that early entrance to first-grade **results in lower achievement**. However, those who begin their academic pursuit at their readiness level excel in achievement, adjustment, leadership, social-emotional development, and motivation. Several factors feed into this discovery.

The cognitive (mental/reasoning) skills required to think abstractly take time to develop. As the brain grows in *structure*, it becomes more adequate in *function*. This process cannot be rushed. Many researchers claim that a child needs a simple environment with few distractions, involving relatively few people (adults or children) for healthy cognitive development to occur.

With the home most obviously fitting this description, a child's potential can unfold naturally like a rose instead of being forced open by a too-early introduction to academics. A small child might be able to recognize simple words now and then, perhaps even at two or three years of age. Yet, if he is required to read, write, or use numbers consistently and is not cognitively mature, the child will often become frustrated, anxious, or even resistant. *Thus by schooling too early, we often create unnecessary learning challenges.*

Young children are basically distant-visioned people. The Carter and McGinnis study established that the visual mechanism at age six is unstable and many children experience difficulty fixating at definite points and keeping their place in reading. Although the eyes may seem mature, and the child may be reading well, young eyes are not developed enough to accommodate *near objects consistently*. Since early academics have become the norm in the United States, the percentage of nearsightedness in young children has also increased. Young

children need to be able to "rest" their eyes by spending plenty of time outdoors for distance-vision.

Learning to read also depends heavily on auditory skills. In some children, the ability to retain and recall speech sounds is not well-developed until the age of nine. Auditory discrimination and auditory memory skills improve with age.

These three factors – cognitive, visual, and auditory development – are the key ingredients of academic readiness. Since most adults nowadays have attended preschools and trooped faithfully through conventional school systems, it may seem that you are "holding your child back". Remember, though, that you are not preventing him from learning, but instead providing him the opportunity to not only learn with ease, but to also love learning. When your child is ready, he will normally beg you to teach him. Sensitivity to your child's individual development will guide you.

Once your child is ready to pursue academics, you can enjoy watching him eagerly master his studies. Unfortunately, at this time you will have to watch out for another pitfall. Conventional schools not only school too early, but they also attempt to stuff too many "peripheral" subjects into the minds of their young students. At your child's readiness level, the most important goals are reading, basic arithmetic, and penmanship. Anything beyond these three basics is overload.

Reading, once thought to be a simple task, actually involves a number of complex mental processes: (1) word recognition, (2) decoding (reading letters that stand for sounds), (3) sound articulation (differentiating between the various sounds of a given vowel), (4) sequential analysis (sequence of letters and sounds), and (5) perception of various thoughts and ideas. This process takes time. Once the student grasps these five levels, he needs practice, practice, practice: practice reading out loud and practice reading silently. Practice *cements* the skill of reading, and will enable him to read virtually anything as he matures.

Penmanship goes hand-in-hand with learning to read. As your student learns his alphabet, he can practice printing each letter in the upper and lower cases. This skill requires hand-eye coordination and manual dexterity. Boys generally loathe penmanship, but if you don't push, your boy can excel as well as a girl. Again, this skill necessitates daily practice and perseverance.

An abstract skill like arithmetic should be first taught using manipulatives. Beans, raisins, or toothpicks work just as well as expensive equipment. Avoid textbooks that only use a paper and pencil approach because in order to understand the abstract concept of any math skill, one needs to work with it in his hands. For example, when learning to count to ten, the child can see what ten actually means when he counts ten apples. If you proceed to eat one of the apples and only nine remain, he just learned subtraction. (A hands-on approach is useful in any math skill no matter how old the student or how sophisticated the material.) Once the student understands the concept, then practice problems will *cement* the concept. Again, practice,

practice, practice.

This stage of your child's education is very labor-intensive for the parent. Because your child is not yet an independent learner, he requires constant supervision. It is so vital that he master these basic skills, that the parent must be disciplined to provide consistent practice. When our children were at this stage, we worked on one subject until we finished a goal and then took a play break outside. Plenty of fresh air and exercise interspersed throughout studies stimulates the brain and revives the will. Mornings are children's best hours, so we reserved afternoons for story time, playtime, chores, and errands.

While your student is mastering his foundational skills, his mind is so intent on learning these basics that any other academic input will undermine the time he needs for practicing these skills. Perhaps you may think that only two hours a day of academics leaves the child plenty of time for other subjects, but your young student needs space away from books to subconsciously sort through all the new information his brain is receiving. As he plays, he may be counting to one hundred, singing his ABCs, or reading a label on a toy. This "space" contributes significantly to mastering his basic skills. To steal that time from your child offers him a flimsy foundation instead.

However, there are some alternative ways to casually introduce history or science: read simple biographies of famous people, subscribe to a child's science magazine, go for nature hikes, and conduct simple science experiments. This relaxed approach provides rich diversity in your child's life without unnecessary pressure.

Because you are introducing your child to the skills that will determine his success in life, this is a critical time. You are giving your child a gift when you establish a solid foundation – a gift that enables him to make intelligent choices about his future.

NOTES:

1. Raymond S. Moore, "Research and Common Sense: Therapies for Our Homes and Schools", Teachers College Record 84 (Winter 1982).
2. Homer L. J. Carter and Dorothy J. McGinnis, *Diagnosis and Treatment of the Disabled Reader* (London: Macmillan, 1970).